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LITTLE MERRY CHRISTMAS



By

WINIFRED ARNOLD



NAS
Arnold



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LITTLE MERRY CHRISTMAS

By
WINIFRED ARNOLD

Little Merry Christmas

Illustrated, 12mo, boards, net 60c.

From the moment she alights, one wintry night, at the snow-piled station of Oatka Center, little Merry Christmas begins to carry sunshine and happiness into the frosty homes, and still frostier hearts, of its inhabitants. How Lem Perkins, her crusty old uncle, together with the entire village, is led into the delectable kingdom of Peace and Goodwill by the guiding hand of a child, is here told in a sweet and jolly little story.

Mis' Bassett's Matrimony Bureau

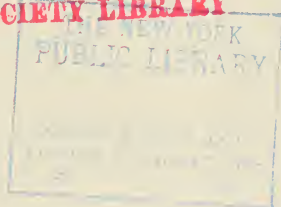
Illustrated, 12mo, cloth, net \$1.00.

Si, Ezry and Zekle, Cynthy, Elviny, and Mirandy, with many another character whose name suggests the humorous and homely phraseology of "way down East," disport themselves to the "everlastin'" delight of the reader.

"There is a good deal of homely philosophy in Mis' Bassett's observations expressed in her delightful way."

—*Rochester Herald.*

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"Mr. Perkins found himself fumbling with the buttons
on a small, blue gingham back"
(See page 18)

LITTLE MERRY CHRISTMAS

By

WINIFRED ARNOLD

Author of "Mis' Bassett's Matrimony Bureau"

ILLUSTRATED



NEW YORK

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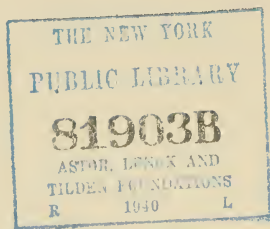
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I

THE SURPRISE PACKAGE



HERE'S a package for you, Hime," yelled the burly conductor. "Brown, with a red label on top. I'll just set it here till you haul down the mail bags."

The station-master's lantern stopped bobbing for a moment.

"All right. Set it down inside," he shouted, over his shoulder. "Snow's so deep to-night I might lose it on the platform."

The little girl in the brown coat and the hat with the big red bow on top, giggled delightedly.

"He'll think it's lost sure enough," she said. "'Twould be a fine April Fool if it wasn't so near Christmas, wouldn't it?"

"A-number-one," agreed the big conductor, appreciatively. "Well, good-bye, sissy; the train's moving. Hope you'll have a fine time."

"Oh, I shall," responded the little girl confidently. "I always do. Good-bye. Oh, look! He's coming!"

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Down the platform bobbed the station-master's lantern, the centre of a moving vortex of big, fluffy snowflakes. After the darkness outside, even the dimly lighted little waiting room seemed dazzling as he stepped inside, dragging the mail bags behind him.

"Where's the bundle Sim Coles left?" he demanded of the little group assembled around the tall, whitewashed stove, slinging his burden at the feet of the village bus driver, who stood with one foot on the ledge around the bottom of the stove, while he slapped his wet mittens against its glowing sides.

"Sim Coles never came in here," answered a tall man with a black beard. "He was talkin' outside with a little gal."

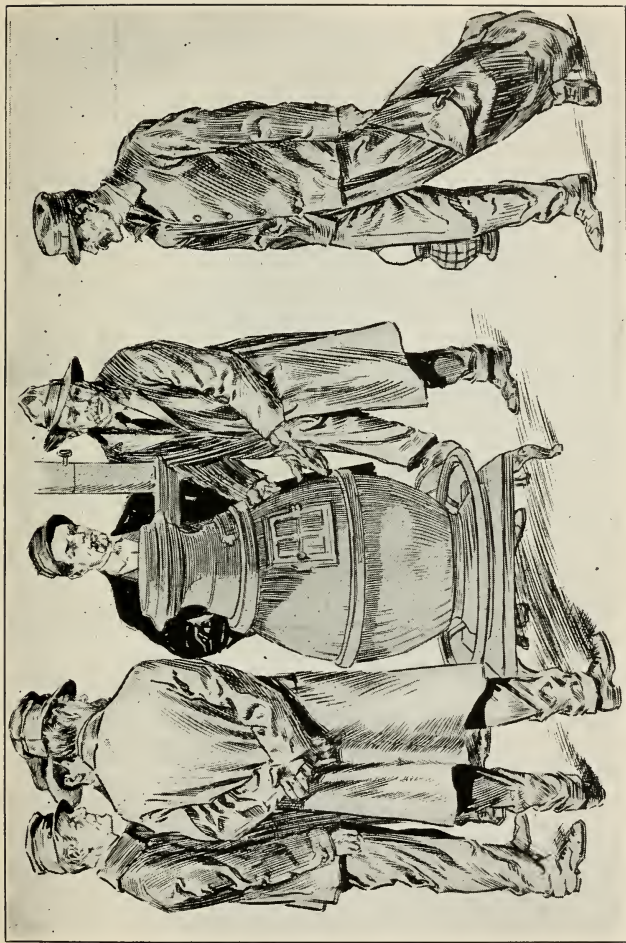
"Likely he's hove it into a snowdrift," grumbled the station-master, turning back toward the door. "Should think he might uv——"

A little brown figure sprang out of the shadows.

"No, he didn't," she contradicted gleefully. "I'm the brown package, you know, and the bow on my hat is the red label. He said it for a joke."

For a moment the group around the stove stared—then they joined in the merry peal of laughter that was shaking the red label.





"Where's the bundle Sam Coles left?" he demanded of the group around the stove

"So you're the package, be ye?" inquired the station-master. "Waal, where are you bound for, sissy? Come on up and let's read that fancy tag of yourn."

The little girl bubbled appreciatively.

"I've come to visit my uncle," she explained. "That is, he's mother's uncle, Mr. Lemuel Perkins."

"Is Lem expectin' of you?" inquired the 'bus driver, leisurely picking up a mail bag from the floor.

"Oh, no. Isn't it fun? I'm a real Christmas surprise, you know, sent early, so as not to overload the mail."

She laughed again.

"Well, I guess you'd better ride along up with me, then. Lem lives just a little piece beyond the post-office."

"Oh, goody!" exclaimed the delighted passenger, with a breezy little rush across the room to the other door. "This will be my second sleigh ride, and I can drop right down on him out of a snowstorm, just the way a Christmas surprise ought to. May I sit on the front seat with you, Mr.—er——"

"Bennett," supplied that gentleman genially. "Drove the Oatka Centre 'bus ever since there was a deepo to drive to. Say, who was your mother, sissy? Did she ever live here?"

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"Not exactly. Her name was Ellen Rumball, till she married father and went to India to live. She used to visit Uncle Lemuel and Aunt Nancy, before Aunt Nancy died."

"Why, pshaw now! She ain't the Ellen Rumball that married a missionary named Christian, is she?"

"Christie," corrected the small person. "We're all missionaries, and live in India. Father and mother and me and the children. Only I'm in boarding school now—Crescent Hill, you know—the *loveliest* school! But scarlet fever broke out, so school closed two weeks early, and the girl I was going to visit has the fever, so I decided to come right down and spend Christmas with Uncle Lemuel. Won't he be surprised?"

The driver peered out through the soft darkness.

"He will that," he drawled. "Lem ain't so gol darned used to children as some."

The little girl's laugh tinkled gleefully.

"Oh, I'm not a child," she explained. "I guess you didn't see me very well; the station was so dark. Why, I'm thirteen and a half years old, and I've been grown up for a long time. I had to be, you see, to take care of the children. Mother had her hands so full with the people and the schools and father's meet-

ings and all that. Being a missionary is the most absorbing work there is," she ended impressively.

"Oh, I see," chuckled Mr. Bennett. "Quite an old lady, and a missionary to boot. That's lucky, now. Lem's been lookin' for a housekeeper for quite a spell, they say—ever since the Widder Em left him. A missionary, now, will come in real handy. I'll drive ye right over first, and stop to the office on the way back. Can you see that light down there? That's Lem's kitchen. Want I should come in with ye, sissy?"

The little girl pondered for a minute. "No, I believe not," she answered. "It would make you seem more like Santa Claus, I think, if you just dropped me and rode away."

Mr. Bennett chuckled.

"Mebbe it would, sissy, mebbe it would. I hain't seen Sandy Claus in so long that I've pretty nigh forgot how he does act. Whoa, there, you reindeers! Hold on while I drop a Christmas passel down through Lem Perkins' chimley. Good-bye now, sissy. Good luck to ye. Giddap thar, you reindeers! Giddap!"

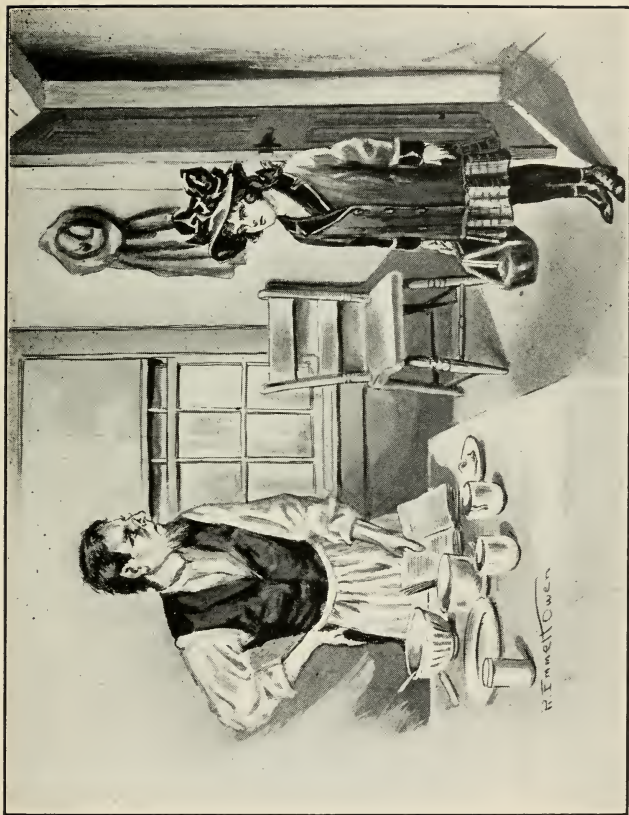
II

PANCAKES FOR TWO



IN the kitchen wing of the old-fashioned brown house an old man was just beginning to get supper, a choleric old man, if one could judge by the bushy fierceness of the shaggy eyebrows above the sharp blue eyes, and the aggressive slant of the gray chin whisker. Mr. Lemuel Perkins had come in rather late from a particularly heated meeting of the village debating society, in grocery store assembled, and you will have to admit that it is not a soothing experience for a hungry man to find the kitchen in dire confusion, the fire in the cook stove nothing but a mass of embers, and not a sign of supper in sight unless the attenuated remains of a solitary dinner answer that description.

A fire was blazing in the stove now, however; and, girdled in a blue gingham apron, Mr. Perkins was adding to the general confusion on the kitchen table by trying to "stir up" something for supper, with the aid of a "ring-



"How do you do! Does my uncle, Mr. Lemuel Perkins, live here?"

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streaked and spotted" recipe book. Intent upon discovering whether a certain eleven was really eleven or only a one and a fly speck, Mr. Perkins totally disregarded the sound of "some one gently tapping, tapping" at his kitchen door, and did not even realize that it had been pushed open till a brisk young voice inquired:

"How do you do! Does my uncle, Mr. Lemuel Perkins, live here?"

"Huh?" demanded Mr. Perkins, whirling about, recipe book in hand, and eyeing the intruder fiercely.

But fierce looks can find no entrance through a pair of rose-colored spectacles that are radiating sunshine and goodwill as hard as ever they can.

"Oh, you are Uncle Lemuel!" cried a happy little voice, while its owner rushed headlong across the kitchen with outstretched arms. "I'm so glad to see you." With a gay little spring she planted a kiss on the tip of the bristling chin whisker. "I'm your grandniece, Mary, and I've come to spend Christmas with you for a surprise. Have you had scarlet fever?"

"Huh?" inquired Mr. Perkins again, a trifle less fierce, but much more bewildered.

"Scarlet fever?" shrieked Mary, deciding at once that of course a proper great-uncle would

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be deaf. "Have—you—had—scarlet fever? I've—been exposed!"

"For the land sakes, little gal, quit your yellin'! I ain't deaf," retorted Mr. Perkins. "Who'd you say you was?"

"Mary, your niece; but I'm not a little girl. I'm thirteen and a half. Mother says I'm a real little woman."

"She does, does she? Waal, we'll see which on us is right about it. Is there one cup of flour in pancakes, or eleven? This blamed receipt book is so messed up I can't tell."

"Oh, are you making pancakes?" returned his guest joyfully. "I'm so glad. I was afraid you'd be through supper, and I'm almost starved. You wouldn't let me make the pancakes, would you, Uncle Lemuel? India's not a very suitable place for them, mother says, so we never had them much, but she let me make them once or twice, and I just love to hear them go splash on the griddle, and then bob up like a rubber ball, and then flop them over, all brown and lovely. It's such fun! But probably you love to make them, too. I oughtn't to ask the first night, I suppose."

Uncle Lemuel's visage, being trained to express habitual displeasure, had no difficulty in concealing the feelings of joy that coursed through him at these words. As he himself

would have expressed it, he "hated like dumb p'ison to cook a meal of vittles," but it was against Uncle Lemuel's principles to display satisfaction with the happenings of the world about him.

"Well," he responded slowly, "if you're so set on it, I s'pose you might as well. Only don't be wasteful now, and stir up a mess we can't eat."

He handed over the recipe book with a grudging air that would have deceived the very elect.

"I won't," promised his guest happily, whisking off her coat with one hand and her hat with the other, and finally finding a satisfactory place for them on a remote rocking-chair covered with red calico. "What fun, starting in housekeeping with you right away like this! And such a grand fire! Will you set the table, and have you got some real maple sirup? I don't think they have at school, but mother said you and Aunt Nancy got it right from your own trees. Do you keep them in the back yard, and go out, and draw some when you want it, as if you were milking a cow?"

She was diving into her russet leather hand-bag as she spoke, and presently she pulled out a blue gingham apron with triumphant glee.

"Here's my big kitchen apron. Isn't it the luckiest thing that I brought it in my hand-bag? I didn't have a chance to wear it at school, so I left it out of my trunk, and then I ran across it at the last minute, and tucked it in here. Everything does turn out so grandly! Why, see, our aprons match! How funny! We're twins, aren't we? Will you button me up in the back, please, and then I'll tie yours again. Yours is slipping off."

In another moment the dazed Mr. Perkins found himself fumbling with the buttons on a small blue gingham back; and then, before he could even think of the first letter of Jack Robinson's name, a capable hand had tightened his own apron strings, and transported by two active little feet was marshalling the various "ingrejunts" that he had already gathered together on the kitchen table.

Muttering something about maple sirup, he retreated to the cellar to collect his wits, though he knew full well that the sirup can, since time immemorial, had occupied the right-hand end of the top "butt'ry" shelf.

By the time he returned the culinary operations had been transferred to the sink bench, and the kitchen table was laid for two. On the stove a shining griddle was smoking in an-

ticipation, while the little cook was giving a last anxious whip to the batter.

"I couldn't find the napkins, Uncle Lemuel," she called, as the cellarway door opened. "Will you get them out, please, and put the butter and sirup on the table? Oh, I do *pray* these cakes will be good! It's such a responsibility to cook for a grown-up man!"

A silence, heavy with the deepest anxiety, settled almost visibly over the Perkins kitchen from the first slap of the batter upon the smoking griddle, till three cakes had been duly "fopped" by the little cook's careful hand. These, however, presented to view such beautiful, round, creamy countenances, almost obscured by very becoming brown lace veils, that two huge sighs of relief exhaled together; one of which was speedily transformed into a dry little cough, while Uncle Lemuel turned and tiptoed away in search of the tea caddy and the old brown pot.

"As soon as we get six, we can sit down and begin," called Mary excitedly. "The stove's so handy I can cook and eat, too. That's such a nice thing about eating in the kitchen. We could never do that in India, there were always too many servants around, though mother tried to keep it as much like an American home as she could. That's why

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she taught me to cook—so we could have American dishes.”

“Can you make pie?” queried Uncle Lemuel, through a mouthful so dripping with maple sirup that even his tones seemed sweetened.

“No, I can’t,” admitted Mary regretfully. “Father didn’t think pie was good for us, so mother never tried to manage that.”

All traces of sirup departed abruptly from Uncle Lemuel’s tones.

“Good for ye?” he growled. “Well, if that ain’t just like some folkses impudence! Good for ye? Humph! Mebbe if I hadn’t et it three times a day I mightn’t have had no more sprawl than to go out to Injy and lay round under a green cotton umbrell’ with a black feller fannin’ the flies off of me. Why, it’s eatin’ pie reg’lar that’s put the United States ahead of all the other nations of the world! It’s the bulwark of the American Constitution, pie is.”

Mary gazed at him with wide and interested eyes. Her mental picture of her own overworked father was so many leagues away from the vision under the green cotton umbrella that, far from resenting Uncle Lemuel’s thrust, she never even recognized it.

“Do you think maybe that’s the matter with

our constitutions?" she inquired eagerly. "I had to come over to school because I wasn't well, and father isn't a bit strong, either. Mother thought it was the climate."

Uncle Lem's growl struggled through another mouthful of sirup.

"Climate! Huh! A man that eats strengthenin' food enough can stand up against any climate the Almighty ever made. I've felt sorter pindlin' myself since I hain't had my pie reg'lar, an' the climate or Oatka Centre is the same as ever, hain't it?"

Even the intellect of a missionary as old as thirteen and a half is forced to bow before such logic as that.

"Then I must learn how to make pie straight away," announced Mary solemnly. "Could you teach me, Uncle Lemuel?"

Uncle Lemuel shook his head.

"It takes womenfolks to make pies," he admitted grudgingly. "I hain't had a decent pie in the house since the Widder Em left here."

"Did she make good ones?" inquired Mary sympathetically.

Uncle Lemuel was almost torn in twain between his natural tendency toward disparagement and the soothing effects of the innumer-

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able procession of well-browned griddle cakes that had come his way.

"There is folks," he compromised, "that thinks she was a master-hand at it. Some say the best in the village. I've et worse myself."

"It's too bad she moved away," sighed Mary; "but I guess we can find somebody else. Mother said the people in Oatka Centre were the kindest in the world, and of course they'd do it for you, anyhow."

A touch of a smile twitched at one corner of the old man's mouth.

"Oh, yes," he assented, with grim humour. "Any durned one of 'em would do anythin' under the canopy for me."

"That's because you'd do anything under the canopy for them," agreed the little girl. "Kind people always find other people kind, mother says. I do wish I could do something for you myself, you're such a nice uncle, but I'm getting so sleepy I can't think of a thing. If you're through, we'd better wash the dishes quickly, else I might," she ended, with a sleepy little giggle, "tumble—splash—into the dishpan."

III

THE NEW HOUSEKEEPER



T was still dark when a resounding thump on the door of the "parlour bedroom" wakened the unconscious little missionary, who had plumped into the exact centre of its feather bed the night before, and had never stirred since.

"Be ye goin' to sleep all day?" growled a voice outside.

The little brown head bounced out of its pillow like a jack-in-a-box.

"Goodness, no!" answered its owner, in a startled voice. "I didn't know it was day-time. Why, I meant to help you get breakfast! Is it too late?"

"I s'pose I can wait, if you're set on makin' some more pancakes," responded Uncle Lemuel craftily. "But you'd better flax around pretty spry. I'll get the griddle het up."

The air of that "parlour bedroom" was certainly conducive to spry "flaxing" if you didn't want to congeal in a half-dressed con-

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dition, and by the time the griddle was well "het," the new cook appeared on the scene.

"Good morning, Uncle Lemuel!" she cried gaily, whisking across the kitchen and planting a swift little kiss upon that gentleman's amazed countenance before she whirled about and presented her blue gingham back to be buttoned. "You certainly are the nicest man in the world to wait so I could cook, and I have planned a perfectly grand surprise for you, too. We're going to have the jolliest Christmas together that ever was. Is the coffee made yet?"

"Who told you to come here for Christmas?" demanded Mr. Perkins, as he began on his second plate of pancakes.

"Nobody at all," bubbled his guest gleefully. "That's the joke of it. It's a perfect surprise all around. I was going home with Patty Stanwood, you know, because her mother and mine used to be school friends. And then Patty had scarlet fever, and her mother was afraid of me on account of the baby. So then I remembered what fine times mother used to have here when she was a girl, and I knew this would be just the ideal place to spend Christmas. You know, I've never seen a real snowy American Christmas before in my life, and I'm just wild about it. The

girls at school call me 'Merry Christmas,' instead of 'Mary Christie,' because I talk so much about it, and I *love* it for a name! Aren't you just crazy about Christmas, Uncle Lemuel?"

Crazy about Christmas? Yes, indeed, little Merry! Why, it was only the afternoon before, Job Simpkins, of the village "Emporium," would have told you, that "Lem Perkins had bellered and tore around as if the very name of Christmas was a red flannin rag waved in front of a bull."

But when he looked into the shining young eyes before him, even Uncle Lemuel's frenzy couldn't fail to be a trifle abated.

"I hain't much use for it—late years," he answered gruffly. "Folks make such tarnation fools of themselves."

"Oh, you are a Christmas reformer," translated his little guest blithely. "Lots of people are in America, they say. Maybe you are a Spug. Are you a Spug, Uncle Lemuel?"

"No, siree, Republican and Hardshell Baptist, same as I've always been. The old ways is good enough for me. What's Spug, I'd like to know?"

Mary clapped her hands.

"I'm so glad!" she cried gleefully. "It's a society to make you give useful Christmas

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presents to people, and I've had useful ones all my life—being a missionary family with five children, of course we had to. But I'd rather join a society to prevent them myself, for I like useless ones lots better. Don't you? I've been hoping awfully that somebody would give me a string of red beads or a set of pink hair ribbons. Oh, I didn't mean that for a hint! Do excuse me, Uncle Lemuel! Of course, I'll like best whatever you choose. How big a turkey do you usually buy?" she ended hastily.

"Don't buy none," grunted Uncle Lemuel, with his nose in his coffee cup.

"Why, of course not! You raise them yourself, don't you? I *am* a goose," she laughed. "Besides, people always invite you when you live alone. I hope they won't this year. It would be such fun to have a Christmas party of our own, wouldn't it, right here in this kitchen? Who do you want to invite? I must go right out and get acquainted, so I'll have some friends of my own to ask. It's only two weeks off, but you can make a lot of friends in two weeks, can't you, if you go about it the right way? See what friends we've got to be already!"

"The science of self-expression" was quite unknown when Uncle Lemuel went to district

school, but it would have demanded a full dramatic course adequately to cope with the torrent of varying emotions that was surging through the time-worn channels of his consciousness. Surprise, disgust, amusement, wonder, disapproval, horror, and a wee touch of pleasure tumbled over one another in rapid succession.

And some way the wee touch of pleasure in the child's innocent friendliness and liking soared high enough on top of the flood to soften the hard old mouth for a little and keep back for the nonce the bitter words that would shatter her Christmas air castles to fragments. Nobody had really liked Lemuel Perkins in so many years that he couldn't be blamed for enjoying the sensation, though he felt as queer as must an ice-bound stream when the first little trickle of water creeps warmly through its breast.

"Want I should help ye with the dishes?" he inquired almost kindly. "I've got to go over to town of an errand after a spell."

"Oh, have you got time? I'm so glad! Do you know, that's the funny thing about dishes? If you do them alone, they are the worst old job that ever was, but when somebody nice wipes for you, they're just fun. Mother says it's that way with most kinds of work. Could

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you stay long enough to help sort things out a little, too? For a man, of course, you're a very nice housekeeper—you ought to see father!—but with two of us around we may need a little more room, don't you think so?"

Fortunately there was no one at hand to reveal the fact that, no longer ago than two hours, Mr. Lemuel Perkins had stated firmly to the kitchen stove that "folks that walked in on you unasked and unwanted should at least pay for their vittles by doing all the housework." Kitchen stoves do not taunt you with changing your mind, so Uncle Lemuel was not hampered by the fear that has kept many a better man from improving on himself.

By half-past nine the Perkins kitchen shone resplendent in the morning sunshine with a brightness reminiscent of the days when Aunt Nancy had boasted proudly that her kitchen was the pleasantest room in the house.

Uncle Lemuel would really have liked to sit down and enjoy its sunny neatness for a while, but an irresistible impulse had begun tugging at his cowhide boots, and Uncle Lemuel had no choice but to set them at once on the path to the post-office. For nine o'clock is "mail time" in Oatka Centre, and either totally unsocial or completely bedridden are

the menfolks who fail to forgather on a fine winter morning in the ever-exciting pursuit of the letter that never comes.

"I'm goin' over to the office, and to get the meat," he announced, pulling his old cap down over his ears.

"Oh, I hope you'll get me a letter!" cried Mary. "I never feel perfectly at home in a new place till I begin to get mail. Do you know the post-master, Uncle Lemuel?"

"Know Marthy Ann Watkins?" jeered Uncle Lemuel. "Knowed her since she was knee high to a grasshopper. And, moreover, if there's a man, woman, or child in this township that don't know Marthy Ann, it ain't her fault; you can bet your bottom dollar on that. Keepin' track of folks is her business. Prob'ly knows what we et for breakfast by this time."

Mary's laughter bubbled out merrily. "Goodness me, Uncle Lemuel! Then she knows that I haven't written to mother yet, to tell her where I am. So I'd better do it right away. Maybe I'll see you over at the post-office by-and-by. Have you any special messages for mother and father, or shall I just send your love?"

Uncle Lemuel was engaged in hauling his old cap still farther over his ears, and apparently he did not hear this amazing question,

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for he emitted no sounds but another grunt before the door slammed behind him.

“He *is* deaf,” decided his little guest innocently; “but I mustn’t make him see that I notice it by asking over. Deaf people are so sensitive. Love will do this time, anyway.”

IV

HUNTING FOR THE PIE-MAKER



T was nearly ten o'clock when Mary pushed open the door of the post-office and stepped in. Not a soul was in sight, so she tiptoed over to the little window framed in boxes.

"Are you Miss Martha Watkins?" she inquired cheerfully.

"Mercy land!" ejaculated a thin lady inside, quitting at one bound her creaky rocking-chair and her enthralling occupation of sorting picture postcards. "Who be you, child, and whose mail do you want?"

"My own, if there is any—Mary Christie's—but I guess there isn't, for I only got here last night. I really came to mail my letter to mother, and get acquainted with you. My uncle said you were the friendliest lady in town, and I'm looking for friends, myself."

"Who's your uncle?" inquired Miss Watkins.

"Mr. Lemuel Perkins, a very old friend of yours. Isn't he nice?"

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Miss Marthy overlooked the last question.

"And what did Lem Perkins say about me, did you say?" she demanded.

Mary knitted her brows.

"He said," she repeated slowly, "that you—that you—oh, I know!—that you tried to be friends with everybody in town, and it wasn't your fault if you weren't. And I needed some help right away, so of course I came to you."

Miss Watkins struggled not to look as pleased as she felt.

"Now, who in tunket would uv thought that of Lem Perkins?" she marvelled. "Well, he hit the nail on the head anyways. I do love to be friendly with folks, that's certain. What can I do for you, sissy?"

"Can you tell me who's the best pie-maker in town, since uncle's housekeeper moved away? It's such a shame she's gone, for I want to learn right off for a surprise for uncle."

"She that was the Widder Em Cottle, do you mean? Mis' Caldwell that is?"

Mary hesitated.

"Uncle said the Widow Em. Is she Mrs. Caldwell, too? He said people thought she was the best pie-maker in town. Is that the one?"

Miss Watkins stared.

"Lem Perkins has certainly met a change of heart!" she ejaculated. "What made you think she'd moved away? She lives in that white house just beyond your uncle's. I'll bet he never told you the whole story, did he?"

She leaned forward eagerly.

But Mary was absorbed in her joy over the happy turn of affairs.

"Oh, goody, goody!" she exclaimed gleefully. "Why, I must have misunderstood uncle some way. Isn't that glorious? Now I can run right right up there, and maybe she'll teach me before dinner. Oh, thank you so much, Miss Watkins. You are a real friend, just as uncle said. I'm going to come down this afternoon and get your help about Christmas, too. Good-bye."

Right outside the door she encountered Mr. Bennett, the 'bus driver, returning from a leisurely trip to the "ten o'clock."

"Well, if here ain't the lady missionary!" he called cheerfully. "Where ye goin' so fast this fine morning? Huntin' heathen?"

Mary giggled.

"No," she returned merrily. "Going to hunt for a missionary myself—Mrs. Caldwell, that was uncle's housekeeper."

"Jump in, then, and I'll give ye a lift. I

have to go right by the door, to carry some feed to Elder Smith's."

"Oh, goody!" cried Mary again, bobbing up on the front seat with one spring. "Another sleigh ride! And now, if uncle's got home, he won't see me go by."

"Has Lem done anythin' to scare ye?" demanded Mr. Bennett, suddenly dropping his joking manner.

"Mercy me, no!" answered Mary gaily. "Some people might be scared of that growly way he has, I suppose; but when you know how awfully nice he really is that only adds to the fun. I'm going now to learn how to make pies for him for a surprise. Isn't it fine she's so handy to our house? She's the best pie-maker in town, uncle says."

"You certainly are the beatin'est young one I've seen in a month of Sundays. Beg pardon, ma'am! I mean beatin'est lady missionary, o' course. I seen your uncle, though, over to the blacksmith's shop, so he won't be poppin' out and sp'ilin' your surprise. Here we be to the Widder Em's now. I'll step in later to get some of the pies."

"Do," returned Mary cordially. "I'll let you know as soon as I can make some real good ones, and then I'll give you all you can eat. Uncle will love to have you."

"Much obleeged," chuckled Mr. Bennett. "I guess I had better drop in and get acquainted with that uncle of yourn, too. He sounds kind of furrin to me."

Just then the side door flew open, and a fresh-looking woman in a red calico dress stepped out.

"Hello, Mr. Bennett," she called. "Got anythin' for me this morning?"

"Why, yes," returned Mr. Bennett jocosely. "A Christmas present of an A-number-one missionary. She's a-visitin' her uncle, Mr. Lemuel Perkins; and now she's got him converted she's run over to neighbour with you for a spell. She'll cure you of any heathen idees you've got, Em, quicker'n scat."

Mary turned to shake her finger at Mr. Bennett, and then ran down the path.

"Isn't he funny?" she laughed merrily. "Anybody'd think Uncle Lemuel was a heathen instead of the nicest uncle that ever was, wouldn't they? But you know better. You've lived at his house. That's why I came over. He says that he hasn't had a decent piece of pie since you left. I guess you spoiled other people's pies for him, for he says you are the very best pie-maker in town. So I came over to see if you wouldn't teach me how. He's been such a dear to me since I came that

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I do want to pay it back somehow—only, of course, you never can exactly.”

Surprise and pleasure struggled in Mrs. Caldwell's countenance, as she led the way into her immaculate kitchen.

“Why, I didn't know 't Lem relished my pies so well,” she said deprecatingly. “I don't lay out to be no great of a cook. Why, yes, of course I'll teach you. 'Taint no knack.”

“Oh, thank you!” cried her little guest, bounding out of the rocking-chair in which she had just seated herself. “Could you do it to-day, do you think? Uncle says he's been ‘real pindling’ since you left, and he thinks it's on account of the pies.”

“You don't say!” ejaculated her hostess. “Lem must 'a' been feelin' sorry for some of the things he said. I'm afeared there ain't time to teach ye much afore noon, but I've got some fresh-baked pies handy. I'll give ye one to take home with ye for dinner. You can come back this afternoon and learn how yourself.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry!” explained Mary. “You see, I really ought to do my Christmas shopping this afternoon. My family live so far away that they won't get their presents now till awfully late, but I couldn't before on

account of the sickness at school. Where's the best store in the village?"

"There ain't but two," laughed Mrs. Caldwell, "and I guess it's which and t'other between 'em. They've both got in a pretty good stock this year. You'd better go to Job Simpson's, I guess. Lem does his tradin' there now."

"Mother sent me five dollars," announced her guest proudly. "I think, with all of that to spend, I'd better divide it between the two. Don't you think it would be fairer? It might hurt the other man's feelings if I didn't buy anything of him, and mother says you mustn't ever hurt people's feelings if you can help it. What do you think Uncle Lemuel would like best? It's hard to choose for a man—even father. What did you usually give him when you lived there?"

When a man grudgingly pays you only two dollars and a half a week for doing all of his housework, and making the kitchen garden besides, it is not very surprising that your Christmas presents to him have been few and far between, but under the glance of the shining eyes before her, the late "Widder Em" suddenly hesitated to explain that fact.

"Why, I dunno," she stammered. "I—I—why don't you give him a coffee cup? I'll

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show you one I got for the deacon. It says 'Merry Christmas' on it in red."

"Oh, oh!" cried the other Merry Christmas, gazing in an ecstasy of admiration. "It'll be just the thing for me to give uncle, won't it? If it only said 'From,' now! Oh, I didn't tell you about my name, did I? Well, I must."

And forthwith, away she pranced on her holly-wreathed hobby, till the woman, too, harked back in fancy to the days when "Christmas" was a name of magic, and launched forth into eager reminiscences of her childhood revels, while her visitor listened, entranced.

All at once she tore her gaze from the shining eyes before her.

"Mercy me, child!" she cried suddenly. "And here I was goin' to have veal potpie for dinner, and the deacon'll be as mad as a hatter if his vittles ain't ready on the stroke!" She stopped and kissed the glowing face. "Couldn't you stay, little Merry Christmas?" she asked softly.

"I wish I could!" cried Mary. "I'd love to! But you see I'm housekeeping for uncle, so I have to go right away. He'd be so disappointed if I wasn't there. I'll come some time with him, pretty soon."

“‘Peace on earth, good will to men,’” quoted Mrs. Caldwell softly. “Then good-bye, little Christmas girl. Here’s another pie for you, dearie—mince. Lem was always partial to mince.”

“Oh, thank you *so* much!” cried Mary in delight. “Uncle will be awfully pleased. He certainly has the nicest friends in the world. Good-bye, you dear Mrs. Caldwell. I must run and get things started.”

It was quarter to twelve when Uncle Lemuel stamped up the snowy path to the kitchen door and flung it open. On the stove a steaming kettle was bubbling merrily. On the table “covers were laid,” as the society column has it, for two. Certainly a pleasant sight for a hungry man who had been cooking his own dinners and setting his own table—if setting it could be called—for two dreary years. But, strangely enough, Uncle Lemuel’s gaze turned unsatisfied from the attractive table, and even rested coldly upon the bubbling pot.

“What’s become of that gal?” he growled to himself, dexterously kicking the door shut behind him.

A little blue gingham catapult dashed out from the departing shelter, and flung herself at his back, while two little hands made futile attempts to reach far enough to cover his eyes.

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"Here I am!" cried a gay voice behind him. "Merry Christmas! Are you Mr. Santa Claus? I hope you've got some meat in your pack for me. I'm nearly starved, honest! I've got the potatoes and turnips on, the way you told me. Do you hear them? Oh, it's sausage! Goody! I love sausage! And what do you think? I've got the nicest surprise for you, too. You'd better cook the sausage, though, for I can't do it very well. And I will make the tea."

Uncle Lem grunted almost as gruffly as ever in response, but, between you and me, that was just because he was trying so hard not to reveal the little thrills of pleasure that were warming the cockles of his hard old heart. And the best joke of all was that he never guessed that the softened glance of his sharp blue eyes and the gentler lines around his grim old mouth were betraying him as fast as ever they could.

Mary bobbed hither and yon, trying the potatoes and relieving them of their brown jackets, preparing the turnips under directions, and making the tea in a most housewifely manner. Finally, she settled down into her place at the head of the table with a sigh of absolute content.

"How do you take your tea, Mr. Perkins?"

she inquired in the most elegant of society tones; then, suddenly resuming her own: "You don't know what fun it is, Uncle Lemuel," she cried, "to be the real lady of the house, and ask about the tea, and say, 'Let me help you to a little more sauce,' or, 'Which kind of pie will you have, mince or apple?' Goodness, I almost gave it away then! And oh, uncle, I can't keep my surprise a minute longer—honest I can't!"

She sprang up from the table and into the pantry, whence she emerged immediately with a beaming face and a pie balanced upon either hand.

"Which will you have, Mr. Perkins, apple or mince?" she inquired gleefully, bobbing a little curtsy to the imminent peril of the pies. "Your constitution won't have to feel 'pin-dling' any longer, for here are two fine, large ones—enough to last several meals, I guess. Mrs. Caldwell sent them to you, with her compliments. She said you liked mince particularly, but I like apple just as well, so we can play Jack Spratt and his wife. People in Oatka Centre are just *lovely*, aren't they? It's because I'm your niece, of course, so far, but I hope by and by they'll like me for my own sake."

As she that was the Widder Em and

Mr. Perkins had not spoken to each other since they had parted with mutual recriminations two years before, it is not to be wondered at that that gentleman laid down his knife and fork, and stared in open bewilderment.

"Em Cottle sent them pies to me?" he demanded. "To *me*? How in thunder did she happen to do that?"

"Why, because she liked you, of course," explained Mary simply. "That's why everybody gives each other things. That's what Christmas is for especially, mother says—to give you a good chance to show other people that you love them—just the way God showed us when He gave us the little Baby Jesus."

And once again something—was it the dear gift that she had mentioned?—kept back the sharp words that were hovering upon the old man's lips.

V

THE TURNOVER GOES TO SCHOOL



IN Uncle Lemuel's able dissertation upon the virtues of pie, that bulwark of the American Constitution, he neglected to mention one of its most remarkable features—namely, its effect upon the flow of the milk of human kindness. Nothing else certainly could explain the fact that when the dishes were finished the next morning he stamped down the cellar stairs and returned presently with a basket of juicy winter pears, which he plumped down upon the kitchen table.

In a voice that was “growlier” than ever, he said:

“If you're goin' over to the Widder Em's any time again, you might as well carry this mess of pears along. Old man Caldwell never did have gumption enough to raise winter pears, and Em was always partial to 'em. You mustn't never let yourself be beholden to folks.”

Mary clapped her hands.

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"How lovely to have a whole cellar full of things to give away! It must make you feel like Santa Claus, and I'm the Merry Christmas that goes with them. And, oh, won't Mrs. Caldwell be pleased!"

But pleasure was far from Mrs. Caldwell's predominating emotion when Merry Christmas presented the basket some fifteen minutes later, with the polite addition that it was "with Uncle Lem's love and thanks."

"For the land sakes alive!" ejaculated the one-time Widow Em, almost letting the gift fall in her amazement. "Is Lem Perkins experiencin' religion in his old age?"

Mary looked a little puzzled by the irrelevance of the question.

"Why, yes, I guess so," she answered happily. "Mother says really good people experience it all their lives. And we're experiencing Christmas, too. Isn't it the best fun? We've begun a list of our Christmas presents, and I put down your pies at the head—apple for me and mince for Uncle Lem. Is it quite convenient for you to teach me this morning?"

"Yes, indeed, sissy; yes, indeed," returned Mrs. Caldwell, recovering herself. "I've got the dishes of fillin' all ready, and we can begin right away. There ain't no knack to it

but the know-how. Don't you know folks always say 'easy as pie'?"

"Why, so they do!" agreed Mary joyfully. "But I thought that meant easy as eating pie. I never knew how easy that was till yesterday. You see, father didn't think they were good for us—and I suppose Indian ones wouldn't have been," she added loyally. "But you ought to have seen Uncle Lem and me yesterday! The pies were so good that we just ate and ate, apple and mince turn about, till we had all we could do to save enough for breakfast. And I do feel perfectly fine this morning—and so does uncle. I guess our constitutions needed it. Could I learn to make three this morning—one for each meal?"

Under Mrs. Caldwell's capable direction, the lesson progressed finely, and in due time three fragrant pies and a turnover were cooling upon the kitchen sink bench—pies that for brown flakiness of crust and general comeliness of aspect would not have disgraced the champion of the county fair herself.

"They look lovely, don't they?" inquired their creator anxiously. "But, oh, I can hardly wait till dinner time to see how they taste! Oh, Mrs. Caldwell, how shall I ever *bear* it if they aren't really good and Uncle Lemuel is disappointed?"

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"There, there, now, don't you fret!" soothed kindly Mrs. Caldwell. "Lem don't always say things out same as some do, but I'll bet a cooky he'll think them pies is as good as any he ever et in his life."

"Oh, I do *pray* that they'll be good!" ejaculated the little cook fervently. "It's such a responsibility cooking for men, isn't it? But I like it," she added naively, "even though I'm scared. Can't I *possibly* tell about them before dinner time?"

Mrs. Caldwell considered.

"Well, yes," she admitted. "If you want to do some extra Christmassin' this mornin', I can think up a job for ye. The schoolmarm, Miss Porter, boarded with me last winter, and she was real partial to a hot turnover for her mornin' recess. If you want to give her yourn, the schoolhouse is only a piece up the road, and if you run tight as you can lick it, I guess you can get there before the bell rings. I'll just tie my cloud over your head, so you can run faster."

Ten minutes later a breathless little figure, in a red "cloud," dashed up to the door of the old stone schoolhouse, just as the joyous pandemonium of recess broke out. Knocking seemed quite a superfluous refinement in the midst of all that babel, so she lifted the great

latch, and then was nearly capsized by a flying wedge of small boys who came hurtling out to the accompaniment of a long-pent-up explosion of war-whoops. The point of the wedge stopped and surveyed the reeling, small figure with the natural defiance of the guilty party.

"What d'you git in my way for?" he demanded gruffly.

To his surprise his victim merely giggled.

"Did you think I was a turnover too?" she inquired. "Because I'm not. This is it, and it's been turned once already. Where's the teacher?"

"Goin' to tell on us?" inquired another boy sulkily.

Mary stared.

"Tell what?" she inquired. "'Twasn't your fault. I got in the way. I hope you didn't smash the turnover, though," she added anxiously. "I'm carrying it to the teacher. No, it's all right, thank goodness! Doesn't it look fine?" she inquired, pulling the covering quite away from her prize.

The little boys crowded closer.

"And *smell!*" cried the first one admiringly. "Where'd you get it?"

"I made it myself," returned Mary, with pardonable pride.

"Did you, honest?" he queried, with the

natural admiration of the normal male for a good cook. "Say, fellers, let's play school. I'll be teacher."

Mary laughed appreciatively, and then her face sobered. Nobody with a sisterly heart in her bosom could have looked unmoved upon those appealing eyes, alight with the eternal hunger of boyhood—and Mary was sister to four little Christies at home.

"If I possibly can—and these are good—I'll bring you a whole pie to-morrow," she promised rashly. "Now I must hurry up to the real teacher, honest."

Miss Porter had just finished opening the windows, and was walking briskly back and forth across the end of the room when Mary approached.

"Good morning," she said, in a politely puzzled voice. "Are you a new scholar? Did you want to see me?"

"I wish I *could* come to school," returned Mary promptly, "but I'm just Merry Christmas here on a visit, so I can't. But I've got a present for you. It's a turnover. I made it, but Mrs. Caldwell sent it. Will you eat it right now, please, and tell me how it tastes? I'm worried to death."

"Thank you so much," cried Miss Porter, laughing. "We'll eat it together, then. I'm

sure it's delicious, but that's the best way to prove it to you. And there's Nora O'Neil. I don't think she brought any lunch, so we'll give her some. And then if we all agree that it's good, it must be fine, mustn't it?"

In two minutes they were all munching happily together on the flaky triangle, which Miss Porter and Nora O'Neil praised till the blushing cook felt that they appreciated her masterpiece at almost its true value.

By this time other little girls, nibbling at their own pies and cakes and doughnuts, had begun crowding shyly around to stare at the newcomer.

"These are my little girls," announced Miss Porter affectionately, nodding to a few of the more timid ones to come closer. "And who do you suppose this is who has come to see us to-day? Merry Christmas! What do you think of that? She was visiting dear Mrs. Caldwell up the road, so she lived up to her name and brought me a nice hot turnover for lunch."

The little girls stared.

"Merry Christmas?" they whispered to one another. "Do you s'pose? Is she—*real*?"

Mary's sharp ears caught the whispers.

"My true-for-a-fact name is Mary Christie," she explained merrily, "but they call me

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Merry Christmas at school because I'm so crazy about snow, and Christmas trees, and Santa Claus, and everything. Aren't you?"

Several little girls nodded eagerly, then a sudden gloom seemed to settle down upon them.

"Might be," hazarded one.

"Why, what's the matter?" inquired Mary, with quick sympathy.

The plague of dumbness lifted all at once.

"We was going to have a tree," began one.

"And a party," interrupted another.

"On Christmas Eve."

"Here to the schoolhouse."

"And give presents."

"And popcorn, and candy, and everything."

"It was all planned out, and the trustees had almost promised."

They took the sentences out of one another's mouth.

"And old Grouchy Gruff heard of it."

Miss Porter's gentle correction passed unheeded.

"Old Grouchy Gruff heard of it, and said he paid most taxes, and he wouldn't let 'em."

"Said 'twas a waste of fire and lights."

"Mean old thing!"

"And my father said he'd give the wood."

"And mine the oil."

"And then he wouldn't let 'em use the schoolhouse."

"'Cause he hates Christmas!"

"I hate *him*!"

"Mean old thing!"

"Children, children!" chided Miss Porter. "You mustn't talk that way. I'll have to ring the bell. We're late already. Won't you stay and visit us a little while, Merry Christmas?"

But Merry Christmas shook her head.

"I can't just now," she answered gravely. "Maybe I will this afternoon. Good-bye!"

The little boys stared in amazement at the quiet little figure that slipped past them with only a perfunctory response to their friendly grins.

"What'd teacher do to ye?" demanded Jimmy Harrison, the one-time front of the flying wedge. "Shall I plug her in the eye with a spitball for ye? I can do it," he added darkly.

Merry Christmas came to herself.

"Oh, no, don't! She's awfully nice," she whispered anxiously. "It's something else—about Christmas," she added. "The teacher didn't do it."

For poor Merry Christmas was struggling with a paralyzing glimpse of human perfidy, and her rose-coloured spectacles were search-

ing in vain for a sunny spot to relieve the awful gloom. Could Christian America shelter such an ogre—a man who hated Christmas so that he was going to prevent a party and a tree—and popcorn—and presents—on Christmas Eve itself? And did that man live in Oatka Centre—the very warmest corner in the heart of that same Christian America? It was so incredible that the rose-coloured spectacles began to see a ray of hope in that very fact.

“Why, he’d be worse than a heathen!” she murmured. “And of course there aren’t any heathen in America, where everybody knows about Christ and His birthday. There’s some mistake, that’s all; and I’ll get uncle to fix it right.”

VI

MRS. EM. TO THE RESCUE



T was over two years now since the Widow Em Cottle had left Lemuel Perkins' house in a rage at some last straw of household tyranny, and then had widened the breach to a chasm by marrying his hereditary enemy and neighbour, Deacon Caldwell. In all that time the chasm had never been bridged by one friendly word, and never, both had declared, would they utter a syllable to each other, if it were to save their lives.

Fortunately, human beings are rarely as bad or as foolish as their own rash vows; and when Mrs. Emma Caldwell stepped out of the Emporium that morning and ran into Lem Perkins, unmistakably headed for home and dinner, she recognized a "leadin' plain as the nose on her face," as she afterward explained to the deacon. And Mrs. Caldwell was far too good a woman to disobey a "leading."

"Mornin', Lem," she began boldly, casting the usual polite fly upon the conversational wa-

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ters. "Much obliged for the pears. They was as tasty as yours always is."

Mr. Perkins nodded.

"The little gal wanted I should send 'em," he explained gruffly. "She's a great hand for neighbourin', sissy is."

The bull having turned his forehead in her direction, Mrs. Caldwell promptly seized him by the horns.

"It's her I want to talk about," she announced. "She's a takin' young one as I've seen in a month o' Sundays, but blind as a bat—or an angel," she added softly. "Land only knows how she's managed it, but she's took all sorts of a shine to her 'dear Uncle Lemuel,' as she calls you—thinks you're the salt of the earth—and good—and kind. Law me, Lem, if you could hear her talk, you'd go home and look in the glass, and say: 'Mercy me, who be I, anyway?'"

"Waal," grunted "dear Uncle Lemuel," turning aside to hide the pleased smile that would twitch at the corners of his mouth in spite of his strenuous efforts, "what's to hender, Mis' Caldwell? Blood is thicker'n water—ain't it?"

"Yourn hain't," retorted Mrs. Caldwell promptly. "It's hern that's got to provide all the thickenin' for two. And as to what's

to hender, you are, most likely. I'm worried to death this minute over how soon that little gal's heart is a-goin' to be stove to flinders, a-findin' out how fur you be from an' angel dropped. She's been up there to my house this mornin' slavin' away over the cook stove a-making pies for a surprise for you, and a-fetchin' of 'em home so careful! Land, I just had to laugh to see her a-carryin' 'em home one to a time—three trips she made of it—usin' both hands, and a-tiptoein' along as if she was Undertaker Pearse a-startin' for a funeral. And now I s'pose she's waitin' there, all nerved up to see how you'll relish 'em—not knowin' that you're just about as likely to say a word o' praise as a rhinoceros in a circus. But if you don't, it'll break her little heart; that's all I've got to say."

"Humph!" grunted Uncle Lemuel. "Well, so that's all you got to say, Neighbour Caldwell, I'm willin'."

"No, 'tain't," retorted Mrs. Caldwell hotly. "'Tain't by a long shot! Another thing that blessed child's all worked up about is that Christmas business over to school. I sent her over on an errand to the teacher this mornin', and they got to talkin' over there about how you set down on their Christmas doin's in the trustee meetin'. They didn't use your name

—called you some kind of a nickname or other, the young ones did—and she never dreamed who 'twas, but come back all keyed up and plannin' to git her Uncle Lem to go to the other old what's-his-name and fix things up. And how she's ever goin' to stand it when she finds that that dear Uncle Lem of hers is the old curnudgeon they was talkin' about, I dunno. It's a sin and a shame, Lem Perkins, how that child's cottoned to you—that's what I call it."

She stopped suddenly with a gulp, and wiped away a tear with the corner of her white apron as she turned away.

Uncle Lem stepped after her.

"Em Cottle," he said abruptly, "you're a truthful woman, as fur as I know—and I've known ye quite a spell. Do you reely b'lieve that young one is so—so—that is——" He paused and cleared his throat. "Does she lot on me as much as she makes out, or is she jest—doin' it—to git my money, mebbe?"

A blaze of anger dried the tears in Em Cottle's eyes.

"Well," she remarked scathingly, "blindness runs in your family, sure enough—only with some it's for bad and with some it's for good—that's all! There ain't no use wastin' no more time on you; that's sure as preachin'."

With a capable hitch of her green plaid shawl, she turned her plump shoulders full upon him, and started briskly up the road.

Uncle Lemuel glanced furtively about him. The village square was empty; not even Marthy Ann Watkins' eye was visible at the post-office window.

"Em! Oh, Em!" he called loudly, and then, as the brisk figure in front seemed to hesitate for a moment, he scuttled after it.

"Don't be in such a brash, Em," he gasped, as he caught up with her. "We hain't had a dish o' talk in so long that I guess we can afford to spend a minute or so a-doin' it. You didn't jest ketch my meanin' then, Em. I didn't reely think that sissy, there, had plans herself, but I didn't know but mebbe Ellen——"

"If Ellen Rumball had had her eye on your old money bags, she wouldn't 'a' broke with you to go off to Injy with that missionary feller, would she?"

Uncle Lem glowered with the remembrance of past injuries.

"Ellen Rumball pretended to like me, too," he muttered; "and then she deserted me in my old age for that good-for-nothin' missionary chap."

"Pretended?" exploded Mrs. Em; "pre-

tended? If 'tain't real likin' that would make a woman swaller down all the things you said, and the way you acted, and bring up her young ones to think you was the finest uncle goin', well, then it's real grace; that's all I've got to say! And here I be, a-quarrelin' with you the same as ever, and I'd made up my mind butter shouldn't melt in my mouth."

But Uncle Lemuel was absorbed in struggling against the softening of his grim old face.

"Ellen *has* fetched sissy up fair to middlin' well," he admitted. "She's kind of smart for her years—handy round the house, I mean, ain't she, Em? And folks—it does beat all! They couldn't nobody around town talk of nothin' this mornin' but 'my little gal,' as they called her. She started out yestiddy arternoon to do her Christmas tradin', and she must 'a' got acquainted with everybody in sight. She promised Marthy Watkins some postcards from Injy. And then the minister comes along, and she got him so interested he asked me if I'd let her speak about missions to the Children's Band. And Nate Waters—you know I hain't been in Waters's store for a matter of a year or so, since he sold me that busted plough—but out come Mis' Waters this morning, to see if I'd mind her savin'

sissy a little red chain she had there. Sissy took to it uncommon, but she didn't have money enough to get it, she'd bought so much truck for other folks, and Mis' Waters wanted to give it to her for Christmas."

"Well, I hope to the land you let her!" cried Mrs. Caldwell. "She was goin' to spend a whole fifty cents a-buyin' you a handsome china cup, Lem, good enough for a president. And, though Nate may be tricky sometimes, Mis' Waters is a real nice woman."

Uncle Lem coughed.

"Well, here 'tis, Em," he replied at last, producing a little packet from his overcoat pocket. "But I guess me and my folks don't have to be beholden to the Waterses yet for our fixin's. You know little Loviny was very partial to red, too," he added, after a moment.

They had now reached the Perkins gate, but Mrs. Caldwell suddenly turned and laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Why, that's who 'tis!" she exclaimed softly. "I've been a-wonderin' and a-wonderin' who that child reminded me of. She don't take after Ellen Rumball exactly, nor yet Christie, as I remember him, but she's got the very same disposition as your little Loviny had, laughin' all day like a brook, and yet as

serious and interested as an old woman about things she took a notion to, and the most lovin' little heart that ever was. I was in the Sixth Reader when she began her A B C's, but she got to be friends with the whole school afore the first week was out—and I guess there wa'n't a dry eye to the Centre when we heard tell about the runaway. 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven'—that was the text to her funeral, wa'n't it? And I guess 'tis, too, fast enough. And 'twould come a heap sooner on earth, I'm thinkin', if there was more like her—wouldn't it? Well, give my love to sissy," she added quickly, with kindly tact, "and tell her I'll look for her again in the morning."

But the old man did not heed her. Across the gulf of over forty years he was looking once more at a gay little figure in red merino, that danced before him, while his little daughter's voice cried happily:

"Father, father, come kiss Loviny in her Kissmas-coloured d'ess!"

VII

EXIT "OLD GROUCHY GRUFF"



UNCLE LEMUEL laid down his knife and fork with a sigh of repletion, and turned toward his little housekeeper.

"Well, sissy," he remarked, softening his growl to a point that he considered positively effeminate, "that ham and eggs was pretty good for fillers, but I wouldn't mind a little somethin' in the line of trimmin's, myself. I s'pose the Widder Em hain't sent in no more pies?"

Mary met this triumph of diplomacy with a masterpiece in kind.

"Oh, Uncle Lemuel," she answered, struggling to hold in leash a half dozen riotous dimples that were determined to pop out, "oh, Uncle Lemuel, it was doughnuts she sent in this time. Won't they do?"

And then she sat with bated breath for fear he should say that they would.

But Uncle Lemuel did not fail her.

"Well, I s'pose I can eat doughnuts," he

growled more naturally; "but what I should reely relish is a good piece of pie."

At these welcome words, Mary fairly ran into the pantry and out again.

"Would you really, Uncle Lemuel?" she cried, in a state of tense excitement. "Well, here it is! Somebody else brought them in this time. Apple!" Back once more from the pantry. "Mince!" Another trip. "And blueberry!" she ended triumphantly. "Which one shall I cut?"

Uncle Lemuel surveyed the sumptuous array before him.

"Well," he finally decided, "the blueberry might soak the crust. I dunno but we'd better begin on that. Who'd you say fetched 'em?"

"Oh, a friend of yours," answered Mary hastily. "She wanted you to guess after you tasted them. Here's a nice big piece. I do hope it's good!"

She handed him a generous piece; and then, unmindful of the luscious blue juice oozing temptingly upon her own plate, she sat and watched his every mouthful with an eager anxiety that would have been transparent to a babe in arms.

"Oh, Uncle Lemuel!" she cried, after the lapse of an eternity at least five minutes long.

"Oh, why don't you say something? Don't you *like* it?"

"Why don't you eat your own?" retorted Uncle Lemuel. "I'm just tryin' to figger out whose bakin' this is. It's kind of new to me, I guess."

"Isn't it good?" cried Mary breathlessly.

"Uh-humph!" responded Mr. Perkins slowly, struggling to twist his tongue to the unaccustomed language of compliment.

Suddenly a queer little sound across the table made him look up, and, to his amazement, he saw that the usually shining brown eyes were dimmed with tears.

"It'll break her little heart," Mrs. Caldwell's voice seemed to whisper, and with one mighty effort Uncle Lemuel threw discretion to the winds.

"It's better than the Widder Em's," he stated rashly. "And I swan I didn't believe there was a woman in town that could beat her on makin' pies."

Pretty good for a man who hadn't turned a compliment in Heaven knows how many years? But Heaven knows, too, how miraculously fast these hard old hearts will soften sometimes under the warming sunshine of childish love and trust.

"Oh, Uncle, do you mean it?" cried a

choked little voice, and, with one bound, Mary had flown around the table and flung her arms about his neck. "Oh, Uncle Lemuel," she sobbed happily, "I couldn't ever have borne it if you hadn't liked it, for I made it myself! You'd never believe it, would you? But you can ask Mrs. Caldwell. She showed me how."

"You don't say," responded Uncle Lemuel, patting her awkwardly on the arm. "Was that what you had your head in the oven for when I came in? I thought 'twas them little wind-bags you give me."

Mary giggled happily.

"The popovers, you mean? Yes, it was. I always have to sit right down on the floor and watch when I make them, else I don't get them out the right minute. I had meant those for a surprise, too, but you got here so soon you surprised me, instead."

"Well, you run around now, sissy, and cut me another good piece of pie. None of your samples, now," he added, with something that was almost a chuckle. "And you might take a bite or two yourself, now you know it's safe. There won't be no extry charge."

It was a veritable incarnation of Merry Christmas who ran to obey these commands.

"You don't know what a weight that is off

my mind!" she sighed blissfully, settling down at last to "bulwark" her own constitution. "They tasted good to me, and to the teacher, and to Nora O'Neil, but of course you were the one that really counted. But, oh, Uncle Lemuel, that reminds me! Do you know who it is that they call 'old Grouchy Gruff'?"

"Huh?" demanded Mr. Perkins, with a growl that would have answered the question to any ears less unsuspecting than those of his little niece.

"Old Grouchy Gruff?" inquired Mary, raising her voice. "Mrs. Caldwell said she couldn't tell me. Do you know him?"

Uncle Lemuel shook his head.

"Don't you, either?" Mary leaned forward confidentially. "Well, Uncle Lemuel, there is somebody around here that they call that. It seems unbelievable, but there's a man in town so horrid that he has stopped the Christmas Eve party at the schoolhouse. The biggest taxpayer, they say he was, Uncle Lemuel. Who would that be?"

But Uncle Lemuel was deeply absorbed in blueberry pie and showed no interest in the identity of old Grouchy Gruff.

"Do you know," continued Mary thoughtfully, "I almost believe there's some mistake

about it somewhere. It doesn't seem possible that there would be anybody who'd stop the children from being happy on the night when the dear little Baby Jesus was born in the manger, and the angels sang: 'Peace on earth, good will to men.' Oh, I just love that part, don't you? The shepherds, and the soft, dark-blue night, and then the lovely star and the angels singing." She paused, and a reverent look softened the brown eyes that shone themselves like two little Christmas stars. "Oh, Uncle, it's so beautiful that it makes little thrills go all over me, and I want to cry and I want to laugh. Mother used to read it to us every Christmas Eve, and then we used to sing, 'When shepherds watched their flocks by night.' Oh, I wish they would sing that at the Christmas party!"

"Thought there wa'n't goin' to be none," growled Mr. Perkins.

Mary smiled cheerfully.

"Oh, I think there will be," she answered confidently. "Mother says things always turn out right when you pray about them, and of course I have; and, besides, it's really His own birthday party, and it must be right for us to celebrate that."

"Was you asked to the party?" inquired Uncle Lemuel.

"Of course I'm not asked yet, because there isn't any; but if we can only get that party for them somehow, they'd invite us both, I'm sure. Oh, wouldn't that be fun! Oh, Uncle, we've just got to! First, you ask everybody all around who old Grouchy Gruff is, and then, when you find out, we'll go and talk to him and explain. Oh, I'm sure he'd take it back if *you* explained things to him. Why, *anybody* would be nice about a thing like that if he only understood."

Uncle Lemuel coughed uneasily.

"Mebbe he has his reasons, sissy," he began; "mebbe he has his reasons. They was talkin' it over to the Emporium the other day, and 'tain't the party part nor the Christmas part that folks objects to so much. It's the schoolhouse. 'Tain't right to the deestrect to tear the schoolhouse to flinders for a thing like that. Why, they'd have to haul up the desks offen the floor, and rack the benches all to pieces, like as not, and move the teacher's desk and all. They couldn't have a party with the floor all cluttered up with desks and such."

Mary pondered.

"And it would be bad for the desks and seats to move them?"

"Tear 'em to flinders," stated Uncle Lem-

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uel uncompromisingly, following up his advantage. "And, besides, they wanted to make candy and popcorn, and a schoolroom is no place for that. They need a kitchen stove."

Mary was still pondering, but her eyes were suddenly brighter.

"Besides," added Uncle Lemuel, delighted that his eloquence was proving even more effective here than it had in that memorable session at the Emporium, "the schoolhouse don't light up very first-class, nor heat neither—for a winter night. We don't want the young ones a-ketchin' their deaths," he finished, with an effective, but unexpected, burst of altruism.

Mary clapped her hands.

"Oh, I knew you and I could fix it all right!" she cried gleefully. "Yes, sir; we can have it right here in this kitchen. I'd rather have it than the other party we planned. And that old Grouchy ogre man won't have a thing to say. Mrs. Caldwell said you couldn't do anything about it, but I knew better. And, oh, Uncle Lemuel, this will be just too lovely for words! We'll put the tree in that corner, and they can make their candy and popcorn on the stove, and still have plenty of room to play games. I knew what you meant the very

minute you said kitchen stove, and I do think you are the nicest, dearest, preciousesest uncle that ever walked, so I do!" She ran around the table again to bestow an ecstatic hug upon the speechless Mr. Perkins. "And everybody else thinks so, too, for I asked them yesterday, and not a person disagreed.

"This kitchen is just like a talent, isn't it, Uncle Lem? I guess you must be the man that had ten of them; you have so many ways to make people happy. I have only one so far—a loving heart; and everybody has that, of course; but mother says, if I keep hard at work with that, I'll get others to use in time. When do you suppose afternoon recess is, uncle?"

"Huh?" inquired Mr. Perkins, in a voice that betrayed his condition of utter daze.

"Afternoon recess?" repeated Mary, more loudly. "I just can't wait to go over and tell those poor children that it's all right. They'll be so happy. Oh, Uncle, you dear, dear thing! Don't you want to go, too?"

"I've got to go over to Meadsbury this afternoon," explained Uncle Lemuel hastily. "Thought you might like to go for the ride. There's room enough in the cutter. You get ready, while I tackle up. We can leave the dishes."

“Oh, goody! My fourth sleigh ride! I’ll just slip on my hat and coat, and run ahead. You can stop at the schoolhouse for me. Do you know, Uncle Lemuel, I don’t want to find out who old Grouchy Gruff is, after all? So don’t ask, will you? I want to love everybody in Oatka Centre, and I know I never could a man like that.”

Up till that moment, Uncle Lemuel had really meant in the back of his mind to “put a stop to sissy’s foolishness” as soon as he could get his breath, but right then and there a most remarkable thing happened. A poor, starved, rickety old organ down under his left ribs, which he had almost forgotten he owned, and would have been ashamed to mention, anyway, suddenly spoke up in the most surprising manner.

“You’ve starved and choked and neglected me for these many years, Lemuel Perkins,” it said, “and tried your best sometimes to kill me off entirely; but the tonic of that little girl’s love, with the tender memories that it awakens in me, has called me back again to life and strength. You may explain in any way you like to those old loafers at the Emporium, you may growl all you choose to old Topsy out in the barn, but you may *not* disappoint that little heart that believes in you and loves you, in

spite of yourself, nor choke up that little fountain of innocent affection that is filling my very cockles full of youth and love."

And Uncle Lemuel proved that he was a wise man, after all, by pulling his old cap down low over his ears, and stamping without a word out to the barn to "tackle up."

Half an hour later he stopped old Topsy in front of the stone schoolhouse, to pick up a small and excited "brown package with a red label," that certainly said "Merry Christmas" as far as you could see it.

"Oh, Uncle Lemuel," cried the package, bobbing to his side as if it were full of springs, "why didn't you come a little sooner? Oh, I wish you had been here! I whispered about it to Miss Porter, and she stopped the classes and let me tell them all myself what you said about the schoolhouse, and that you invited them to come to your house for the Christmas party. At first they thought my uncle was Deacon Caldwell, wasn't that funny? But when they heard that it was you, they all just clapped and clapped. They like you awfully, don't they, you dear, dear Uncle Lem? And then they gave three cheers for Merry Christmas—that's me; and then three more for you. Oh, I wish you could have heard them say: .

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‘What’s the matter with Mr. Perkins? He’s all right!’ I was so proud, I almost cried when I heard them. Uncle Lemuel, this is going to be the very happiest Christmas that ever was, isn’t it?”

VIII

UNCLE LEM'S CHRISTMAS PARTY



THE village of Oatka Centre had no sooner swallowed the amazing fact that Lemuel Perkins was going to give the school children a Christmas party in his own house, than its bump of credulity was again strained almost to the bursting point by the information that Mrs. Em Caldwell was helping actively about the preparations, and that Mr. Lemuel Perkins himself had been seen bringing several parcels from "Nate Waterses store," and even talking amicably with Elder Smith on the subject of missions in India and a certain small missionary from that land, though various essential differences between free will and predestination had previously cleft an impassable gulf between them.

"Will wonders never cease?" marvelled Oatka Centre, and then decided unanimously that they certainly would not, for about that time it transpired that the children's party had enlarged into a neighbourhood celebration, and

that every man, woman, and child in the village was invited.

It had been Merry Christmas's first idea to invite the fathers and mothers to come with their children; but then so many of her particular friends—like Mr. Bennett, and Mrs. Caldwell, and Miss Marthy Watkins—were not blessed with children that it seemed impossible to narrow the gates of paradise in that manner. And when it was once decided to light the fires in the long-disused parlour and sitting-room, there really seemed to be no excuse for shutting out anybody; particularly as Uncle Lemuel developed a sudden mania for inviting every person who had a good word to speak for his "little sissy"; and who in Oatka Centre hadn't by the time those two jolly weeks of holiday preparation were over? For, like an unconscious messenger of "peace on earth, good will to men," she had bobbed from the schoolhouse to the stores and back again, and presently into every house in the village, on one errand or another, trading happily with her one little talent, and leaving a trail of "Merry Christmas" in the air behind her.

Talk about your Marconi stations! There is nothing like a little human heart brimming over with goodwill, and bubbling with enthu-

siasm, to fill the air so full of Christmas spirit that not another thought can find a wave to ride on.

And so it happened that by the time the windows of the brown Perkins homestead were set cheerily ablaze the snowy village streets were crackling and snapping merrily under the tread of many feet.

"I dunno as I'd orter 'a' shut up the post-office and come," confided Miss Watkins to her neighbour, Mrs. Waters, as they creaked cheerfully along together at the end of the line, "when the six o'clock is so late and the mail hain't come in, but Merry Christmas she couldn't have it no other way. She said she was goin' to have Tom Bennett for Sandy Claus, anyway, and she'd just rig him up and have him fetch in the mail bags, too, and I could call the letters and passels out right there."

"That's a good idee," assented Mrs. Waters. "Trust that little gal for fixin' things around. She got Nate to shut up, too; and Job, he's even locked up the Emporium. Both on 'em is about sold out, anyway. There hain't been such a time for Christmas tradin' in Oatka Centre dear knows when. It's funny how that young one stirs things up. It's her bein' brought up in Injy, I expect, and a mis-

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sionary's daughter, so. Why, the Baby Jesus and the shepherds and the wise men and the angels and all is just as real to her as if they was out in Lem's paster this minute, and she seen 'em. Makes you feel kind of green to have a young one come from heathen lands to teach us Christian folks about Christmas!"

"It's her takin' things so for granted," explained Miss Watkins. "I hain't give nobody much for Christmas in years, made an excuse of bein' in the office and not havin' time; and so I told her when she was in consultin' me about some of her Christmas doin's. Well, sir—the next afternoon in she breezed about two o'clock, and said she'd come to tend office for me till four, so I could go and do my tradin'; and land if she hadn't wrote a list, too, of some things that she'd heard my sister's young ones say they wanted." She stopped to laugh deprecatingly. "Well, [Priscilla, you know I come and bought 'em, don't ye?"

"I bet that's how she's worked it with Lem," answered Mrs. Waters. "Took it for granted he was so decent that he was ashamed not to be. Lem's reely quite human these days. Do you remember his little gal, Loviny, that he lost years and years ago. Well, he's been and hunted out a little red dress she had, and he wanted me to get some cloth just that colour

and then to have Mis' Mosher make it up on the sly for Merry. It was for a Christmas present, but Mis' Mosher carried it up this mornin', and I'll bet she'll have it on to-night."

By this time the two women had reached the brown gate, and they stopped to admire the Christmas wreaths that shone against the lighted panes.

"Twenty on 'em there is, in all, and a little bell inside of each one," announced Miss Watkins. "Miss Porter told me, though you can't see but twelve from here. The young ones made 'em yesterday to the schoolhouse. Say, there she is now—red dress and all!"

There she was indeed, little Merry Christmas, in her "Kissmas-coloured" dress, with a wreath of holly crowning her brown braids—literally exploding with joy and delight into a hundred little ripples of laughter.

Unmindful of the cold air outside, she danced down the steps to meet the latest comers.

"Oh, goody!" she cried. "I was so afraid you'd be late, and I didn't want you to miss anything. The children are going to sing their carols first, and then we're going to have the tree and then the popcorn and candy. We made those this afternoon, for there really wouldn't have been any room to-night, there

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are so many here. And uncle has put a dish of apples everywhere he could possibly make room. He thinks apples are almost as healthy as pies. You just come this way to the back entry and hang your things up. Oh, listen! They're beginning now. Do you suppose I can ever get into the kitchen far enough to sing?"

She certainly couldn't if she had been anybody but her active little self, for everybody else seemed to want to get into that kitchen, too. And no wonder, for it was certainly an attractive spot, with its old walls wreathed with ground pine and gay streamers, and the lighted Christmas tree sparkling at the end, with a ring of happy young faces beneath it, lustily carolling their Christmas songs.

It was a mammoth kitchen, too, built in the days when the kitchen was really the living-room and the heart of the house. But, bless you! it would have taken half a dozen such kitchens to contain all the happiness and eager anticipation and radiant good-fellowship that were rampant there; to say nothing at all of all the people who were disjointing their necks, and standing on each other's feet, and poking holes in each other's ribs, in their anxiety to hear the music, and see the decorations, and most of all to satisfy themselves for the hun-



"Oh, goody!" she cried. "I was so afraid you'd be late, and I didn't want you to miss anything"

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dredth time that their own little Johns and Marys were far and away the handsomest children there, and the best singers, and that it was a wonder that all the other fathers and mothers weren't blushing with mortification at the painful obviousness of these facts.

First and foremost of all these self-complacent mortals was Mr. Lemuel Perkins, though he would have been the last person in the world to admit, or even to suspect, the fact; though nobody knows how else he could have explained the proud lift of his bristling chin whisker, or the positively vainglorious swelling of his chest, as a certain little holly-crowned figure in a red dress was lifted mysteriously on high, and smiled radiantly upon the assembled guests.

"Santa Claus is rather slow to-night," announced the clear, childish voice, "because some of his pack came by mail, and the train is late; but my Uncle Lemuel will take his place till he comes. Oh, there he is, over by the sink. Will you let Uncle Lemuel through, if you please?"

Uncle Lemuel glanced wildly about, but there was no avenue of escape unless he leaped directly through the sink window. And in front of him a way was opening through that mass of humanity as miraculously as if Moses

had been present with his famous rod. Even his growl of dissent was lost in the merry babel of voices around him, as a score of hands pushed him forward to where a little red-garbed figure welcomed him joyfully.

"I'll help you, Uncle, if you can't see the names very well," she whispered. "But they'll like to have you do the calling out."

"Now, look here, sissy," he protested; "I ain't goin' to have no foolishness. Tom Bennett can rig himself up in a mess of red flannin and cotton battin' if he wants to, but I hain't goin' to make no show of *myself*."

"Mercy, no!" giggled Mary. "You aren't round enough for Santa Claus, anyway. You just call out the names. Here's one for Elder Smith, and Sarah Haskell, and Deacon Caldwell. There are perfect heaps. Oh, hurry, do!"

Uncle Lemuel glanced at the first parcel, and a grim, "down-East" sense of humour triumphed.

"Waal, Elder Smith," he announced in stentorian tones, "I seem predestined to hand you over this passel, that's sure. I'll bet you can't prove it was my free will this time."

The burst of laughter that acclaimed this witticism was so intoxicating that Mr. Perkins promptly proceeded to make another,

which was even more successful. Whereupon he yielded himself so thoroughly to the unaccustomed delight of public appreciation and approval that when the real Santa Claus finally came he was forced to divide his honours with a determined Uncle Lemuel, who evidently regarded him as an upstart and an interloper.

But bless me! nobody minded that, and least of all the genial Mr. Bennett, for two Santa Clauses and a Merry Christmas and half a dozen understudies and assistants were none too many to tackle that mass of Christmas presents and clear them out of the way in time for the games and other jollifications to begin.

It was a mercy that the popcorn and the molasses candy were all made beforehand, for otherwise the whole school, and their presents, and their teacher, and the tree, would have been stuck together in one huge and inextricable popcorn ball; they barely escaped that fate as it was just in the eating of those toothsome dainties. But blindman's-buff and stage-coach and puss-in-the-corner have their advantage in the line of keeping things moving and preventing you from being glued for life to your next neighbour if you chance to adhere in passing.

"Well, this is a real, right-down, old-fash-

ioned Christmas party, 'same as mother used to make,' ain't it?" queried Deacon Caldwell jovially of the man next him and then stopped suddenly, as he realized that that man was his time-honoured foe, Mr. Perkins.

But Mr. Perkins had no thought for any ancient grudges just then.

"What's become of sissy?" he demanded sharply. "I can't spot her nowhere in sight. She was blindman along back, but she hain't playin' now."

"She must be in the parlour," suggested Deacon Caldwell kindly. "Like as not she went in to hunt up Em. They're great cronies, her and Em."

"No, she ain't," retorted Uncle Lemuel shortly. "She ain't there nor in the settin'-room, nor upstairs in the bedrooms. You don't s'pose she's been and took sick, somewheres, do ye?" he added anxiously. "Et too much stuff, or come down with that scarlet fever, mebbe?"

"Why, sho now, Lem!" cried the deacon sympathetically. "I'd hate to think so. But let's go get Em. Em's a master hand in sickness if need be."

"It'll be easy enough to find her by the red dress," said Mrs. Caldwell encouragingly as she joined the little party of searchers. But "up-

stairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber" they looked, and no sign of the "Kiss-mass-coloured" dress did they see.

"There's the cellar and the woodshed still left," comforted Mrs. Caldwell, glancing sideways at Uncle Lemuel's grimly suffering face.

And just as they reached the back-entry door, a little figure in a red dress popped in from the woodshed entrance, a radiant little figure, that waved a lantern on high, and flung itself joyfully upon Uncle Lemuel.

"Where've you been?" demanded that gentleman with the gruffness of relief. "We've been huntin' you from garret to cellar."

"Oh, I'm so sorry if you worried!" cried Mary penitently. "I never thought you'd notice. Mr. Bennett brought me a letter, you see, from mother—my Christmas letter—and of course I was dying to read it, and I couldn't find a single place that was quiet, so I took a lantern and went out to the woodshed."

"I hope you hain't took your death of cold," cried Mrs. Caldwell anxiously.

"Oh, no; I'm warm as toast," answered Mary happily. "And I've had the nicest news you ever knew. Father and mother and the children are all coming back to America! Isn't that lovely? That's been the only drawback to this perfectly beautiful Christmas here

—missing them all so—and now—just think! They're coming, too!"

"How do they happen to be comin'?" queried Mrs. Caldwell, returning Mary's ecstatic embrace.

"Why, it's on account of father's health. Father's not been very strong for a long time. But neither was I, and look at me now! He'll be all right as soon as he gets to Oatka Centre, and eats enough pie and things."

"Oh, are they comin' here?" inquired Mrs. Caldwell, in a voice in which pleasure and surprise were mingled. Oatka Centre had not yet forgotten that when Ellen Rumball chose to marry and go to India, she had done so in face of the threat that the Perkins doors would be closed to her henceforth and forever.

But Mary returned her gaze with wide-open, astonished eyes.

"Why, she didn't *say* Oatka Centre," she cried. "But where else should they come? Why, mother loves Oatka Centre better than any other place on earth, she always says. And father has no family at all. So Uncle Lemuel is our nearest surviving relative," she ended quaintly.

"Why, that's so, of course," agreed Mrs. Caldwell hastily. "How soon did you say they was comin'?"

"Right away, mother says. Isn't that grand? Maybe I won't even go back to school. Crescent Hill is lovely—for a school; but of course a real home, with Uncle Lemuel and the rest of my family, would be lots nicer. Oh, Uncle Lemuel, aren't you glad as can be?"

But the old man was gazing at her with dazed eyes.

"Was you—goin' back—to school, sissy?" he said slowly. "When?"

"Why, week after next, Uncle Lemuel. We've had a whole month, you see. But if mother is coming here to live maybe she won't make me, and I can stay right along and bake pies for you all winter. Oh, goody, goody! I'm so glad that my toes are skipping round inside my shoes. Do come with me while I go and ask Miss Porter what class she would put me in."

But Uncle Lemuel, muttering something about "the stock," stepped to the back door, and walked slowly out under the silent stars.

"Oh, he's going out to see if they kneel down," explained Mary happily, after a second of surprise. "I heard that the animals all knelt in their stalls on Christmas Eve; and he promised me that he'd go and look and call me if they did. But I'm afraid that he's too

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early. They don't do it till twelve o'clock, I think. I must run and tell him to wait."

Mrs. Caldwell laid a detaining hand upon her arm.

"I wouldn't bother him if I was you, dearie," she said. "Mebbe he'll find 'em now. It's Christmas Eve, anyhow."

For Mrs. Caldwell, down deep in her heart, was praying eagerly that the stars of Christmas Eve would lead Uncle Lemuel, as they had led the Wise Men long ago, to learn the lessons of humbleness and love by the side of a manger.

IX

MERRY CHRISTMAS FINDS THE HAPPY NEW YEAR



MERRY CHRISTMAS!" shouted a gay little voice, so close to Uncle Lemuel's ear that he turned suddenly and almost dropped the pen with which he was laboriously scratching upon a sheet of paper. "Merry Christmas! You were such a dear not to wake me up, but it is really scandalous, isn't it, not to get up early on my namesake morning? And you've been wanting your breakfast, I know. Aren't you nearly starved, Uncle Lemuel, honest?"

Uncle Lemuel permitted himself the luxury of a wintry smile.

"Pretty nigh," he assented. "I hain't had a bite to eat but half a pie, and three, four doughnuts, and two cups of coffee, and a little bread and butter. Before you get them buckwheats going I'll likely drop in my tracks."

Mary giggled appreciatively.

"Poor thing!" she cried, with tender mock-

ery. "Well, I'll hurry. Wasn't Mrs. Caldwell a dear to mix these for me before she went home? And weren't she and Mrs. Waters and Miss Watkins and Miss Porter perfect *angels* to stay and clear up the house for us? Oatka Centre people are certainly the loveliest in the world, just as mother says. Why, Uncle, what are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing," returned Mr. Perkins briefly; "just a-writin' a letter." He spoke as carelessly as if letter writing were a daily occurrence with him, instead of an event that was more nearly decennial. "You hurry with them cakes, sissy. I'm used to havin' my breakfast some time afore sundown, though I s'pose any time will do for them that's lived turned upside downward on Injy's coral strand."

This was a time-honoured joke between them by now, so Mary giggled again, meanwhile beating her batter with a skilful hand and issuing directions about the table setting.

"Let's have it right over under the Christmas tree. I'm so glad they had to leave that! And you must put on your new cup and drink your coffee in it. See, I have my red chain on this morning. I didn't dare to wear my be-yoo-tiful red dress, but I'm going to put it on for dinner when we go to Mrs. Caldwell's.

I'm so glad she's going to have Miss Porter, too—and Mr. Bennett. I was afraid they didn't have any nice place to go. And, oh, Uncle Lemuel, what's that box you're hiding in my chair? Another present? You *dear!* I'm going to open it right away!"

"You hold your horses, sissy, till you get them cakes done," growled Uncle Lemuel.

In due time a stack of cakes that matched Uncle Lemuel's appetite was ready, and then the box was opened and the girl "began to sing," though "sing" is really a very polite word with which to describe the series of shrieks, squeals, and even whoops of ecstasy with which she greeted the consecutive appearance of six wonderful sets of hair ribbons.

"I shall wear them all!" she cried recklessly, and promptly proceeded to deck her neat brown braids like May poles with a series of fluttering bows—red, light blue, dark blue, yellow, white, and, at the very end, two wonderful rosettes of exquisite pink, which were rivalled in colour only by the tint of the cheeks above them.

"Oh, Uncle Lemuel!" she cried, in solemn rapture. "I feel as if I must have died and gone to heaven. I love pink so that it almost makes me ache to look at it. That's my only objection to being an angel—always having to

wear white clothes and wings. Don't you think maybe, if I was very good, the Lord would let me have a set of pink ones for Sundays?"

But Uncle Lemuel's theology was not prepared for such imaginative flights.

"You'd better eat your vittles, sissy," he remarked drily. "Time enough for choosin' your wings when you have them to wear. Coffee's kind of tasty this mornin'," he added craftily. "Wonder if it's the cup?"

"Let me taste yours and see," cried Mary, prancing eagerly around the table. "Yes, I believe it is. Oh, Uncle, see what I've done—got a splash of coffee on your letter! I'll see if I can't mop it off. Why, Uncle, it begins, 'Niece Ellen!' Were you writing to mother?"

Uncle Lemuel nodded.

"You see," he explained slowly, "Ellen and me, we had some words a while back, and I thought mebbe she mightn't feel free—that is, I thought mebbe she and Christie would feel freer to come and make their home with us for a spell if I wrote and invited 'em right away. I told 'em that the school was first-class, and that I should start you right there with Miss Porter till they come. Do you like that idee?" he ended anxiously.

Mary embraced him rapturously.

"Like it?" she cried. "Oh, Uncle Lemuel, I like it so much I can scarcely speak! I never saw anybody that did such lovely things for people all the time!" She paused a minute, and then clapped her hands. "Oh, I know what you are!" she said suddenly. "We are twins, just as I said—for I am your little Merry Christmas, and you are the great, big Happy New Year that goes with me."

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